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Star Base Andromeda book reviews

Below and on the following pages are book reviews to accompany some of the reviews given at the end of today's literature presentation. On the back cover, you will find information about our club, in case you'd like to join us for future meetings! Thanks for attending tonight's event...

— *The members of SBA*

Hyperion by Dan Simmons 1989

Ever since reading portions of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in High School English, I've been intrigued by this literary format. I've always thought it would be an interesting form for a science fiction novel. *Hyperion* is that novel. It is the tale of seven people, a priest, a soldier, a poet, a scholar, a starship captain, a detective, and a consul, all on a pilgrimage to the planet Hyperion. A planet in the midst of several crises. On the verge of being engulfed in an intergalactic war; home of the time tombs, mysterious buildings surrounded by an anti-entropic field which for centuries has kept them apart from normal time, which are now on beginning to open; also home of the shriek, a bizarre unstoppable alien killer which has again appeared after a century-long absence.

Why are these seven pilgrims going to such a dangerous destination? Each has this question of their fellow travelers, so to pass the time on the long journey they agree to tell their stories. Each of these stories is in and of itself a compelling, sometimes powerfully disturbing tale. They are also each pieces of a grand jigsaw puzzle, revealing bit by bit the complex galactic civilization these characters are a part of and the conflicting machinations by powerful forces in this civilization which has led to the current crisis. They each also deepen the mystery surrounding the central figures of the story, the planet Hyperion, the time tombs, and the shriek. Between tales are interludes where the characters

interact and journey through space and then on the planet Hyperion itself to their final destination, the time tombs. Taken as a whole it is a remarkable novel of epic, almost mythic, proportions. One that I highly recommend.

The one warning I will give is that the novel does not have a conclusion which answers many of the mysteries it has established. That is left to its sequel *The Fall of Hyperion* which I recommend having handy to read when you finish *Hyperion*.

— *Mark Murphy*

The Fall of Hyperion by Dan Simmons 1990

At the end of *Hyperion* we are left with the main characters entering the valley of the time tombs, having journeyed through space and the wilds of the planet Hyperion and in the process each having told their tale of how and why they are here. We also have a galactic civilization known as the Hegemony in the midst of a devastating war with the rebel Ousters. A war also centering above the planet Hyperion. *The Fall of Hyperion* continues this story, alternating between the pilgrims' explorations of the time tombs and each meeting their fates and events on the capital planet of the Hegemony as the galactic crisis continues to the critical point and beyond. Through these two viewpoints *The Fall of Hyperion* begins to unravel the answers to the myriad intrigues that make up this epic story. What amazed me about this sequel is the masterful way this is done, tying together seeming disparate plot points into

a single surprising and satisfying conclusion. I can't really go into much detail about this story without spoiling these surprises. I'll just end by saying that *The Fall of Hyperion* is a wonderful sequel to this grand story, which I highly recommend.

— *Mark Murphy*

Time and Chance by Alan Brennert 1990

This hard-to-find novel, by SF-fantacist Alan Brennert was a joy to stumble across a few years back. One of my all-time favorite novels is a contemporary fantasy/love-story by Brennert titled *Kindred Spirits* (also worth tracking down if you can!), and I'd enjoyed the stories Brennert had penned or adapted from other authors' works for the revived *Twilight Zone* in the late 1980s. So finding this at a local bookstore in early 1990 was a treat.

Time and Chance is a bit SF, a bit fantasy, and a bit of that nebulous zone in-between. It actually would've worked very well as a lengthy episode of either Rod Serling's original *Twilight Zone*, or the harder-edged version CBS gave us from 1986 to 1988. The story involves Richard Cochran, a man who 13 years ago left his small hometown and began the long, hard climb to stardom. Now, he's a successful Broadway actor with a broken marriage and several failed relationships to his credit. On the downside, he's increasingly dissatisfied with his life and feeling an empty ache. Somehow his perfect life has gone sour, and

continued on next page...

See SBA Club info on next page...

Andromeda Officials

Mike Ponte

(Presidio, Registrar, Historian)

Phone: (402) 435-5602

E-mail: mponte@unlinfo.unl.edu

Scott Clark (Editor, CCC, Publicity)

Phone: (402) 421-3717

E-mail: SDCandREW@compuserve.com

Frank Dreier (Librarian)

1330 N. 37th St. Lincoln NE 68503

David Teche (Treasurer)

E-mail: dt1145@navix.net

Agris Taurins

(ConCussion rep/List maintainer)

E-mail: taurins@penguin.inetnebr.com

Editor: Scott Clark (e-mail address at left)

Contributors: Scott Clark, Frank Dreier, Terri Muggy, Mark Murphy, Mike Ponte, Rod Vasek

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he longs for what he might have had. Somewhere else is a Rick Cochrane who did not leave his hometown to pursue stardom. He married his college sweetheart, settled down to raise a family. He is an insurance claims adjuster, and he is very good at his job. But he is on the verge of madness, consumed by a deeply hidden rage. All that he might have been was destroyed by a single decision and slowly he is growing to hate all that he ever loved.

These two men, living different lives in divergent realities, both suffering from the wounds of decisions that cannot be unmade. *Or can they?* Separated by time and chance, these two men are about to make a startling discovery that will change their lives forever. For a shining moment the road not taken beckons, and it is up to each of them to walk that different path in the other's shoes.

I found this story (like *Kindred Spirits* before it) to be people with characters who were extremely real, feeling real emotions and suffering from the harshest and most believable of regrets. You could see the shadows of each other in the two R. Cochranes — each what the other could have been, "if only...". Brennert has a real flair for honest emotions and realistic dialogue, as well as fully fleshed-out characters. If you're a fan of the morality plays and introspection of the best episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, then I highly recommend this book. Brennert has also released *Her Pilgrim Soul and Other Stories*, the title story of which formed the basis of his best *New Twilight Zone* episode. He has another book out as well, the title of which escapes me as I write this. Those four comprise his entire print list. I recommend them all.

— **Scott Clark**

Protector by Larry Niven 1973

Protector, one of the primary stories of Niven's *Tales of Known Space* sequence, is a story about humanity's first contact with an alien race — a race that may not be so alien after all. The Pak was a war-hungry race, each clan promoting its bloodline over every other clan. Phssthpok lost his clan, and found a reason for living searching for a lost Pak colony — the most like target being our own solar system.

The first human to meet Phssthpok, asteroid miner Jack Brennan, was never seen again — as Brennan. What results is a race against both time and space to protect the human race from a species vicious enough to commit genocide. Niven keeps the science in science fiction as he works out a story that spans many generations. The characters learn to live with sacrifice, and make others learn sacrifice, as they try to preserve all they know and love.

— **Roderick Vasek**

The Best of Cordwainer Smith edited and with an introduction by J. J. Pierce 1975

Nearly all of Smith's stories fall into the "Instrumentality" series, an immense future history named after the "ruthlessly benevolent" rulers of Old Earth who consider themselves the instruments and protectors of human destiny. In a millennia long dark age following global wars, everything seems on hold until German sisters awakened from suspended animation bring vitality and purpose back to the world. The second age of space begins, and while individuals make massive sacrifices to take humanity to the stars, society becomes

decadent and capable only of distaste for their suffering and courage. Eventually Earth and many of the colonies become a listless, pointless, and nearly suicidal preprogrammed utopia until certain lords and ladies of the Instrumentality conceive the "Rediscovery of Man", reinstating strife and uncertainty. Meanwhile, a conspiracy thousands of years old to bring equality to the almost more-human animal-derived "Underpeople" finally unfolds, bringing the destinies of both races together.

Actually, lots more happened, but Smith died hundreds of thousands of words before he could tell us; the relatively few stories constantly and casually toss out asides and hints to things you'd like to hear about but never can. It isn't so much a straightforward chronicle of the history as it is slices of lives scattered with gaps of millennia between them—not just those pivotal players, but others caught up in major events or just the trends and side-shows of history. Almost all are told as stories long in the past, a few are the fairy tales that grew out of the actual events, some are debunkings of the popular legends.

What would be space opera anywhere else feels like oriental legend here. But the romanticism and the fantastic plot devices somehow don't clash with the harsh and almost cynical realism of his treatment of political power, society, and psychology. The barrages of evocative and just terribly strange ideas, images, and scattered background details are arranged into poetic, haunting glimpses of unfolding history. Smith sticks you right down into his universe and while reading it is just *there*, more than some other more developed and realistic SF settings.

Here are just a few highlights that can be briefly described. *Scanners Live In Vain*: Men voluntarily sentenced to a half-life of severed senses so humanity can go into space plot against the man who could release them. *The Lady Who Sailed The Soul*: A woman goes through horrendous surgery and augmentation to stay awake and in agony for forty years piloting a solar sailship (it's a love story). *The Game of Rat and Dragon*: Telepaths become one with cats battling in the interstellar dark. *The Dead Lady Of Clown Town*: Embryo sent to the wrong planet sets in motion a 2,000 year rebellion (a retelling of Joan of Arc). *Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons*: The richest people in the galaxy live in frontier conditions to preserve their cultural identity, but go to extreme lengths to make examples of raiders. *Alpha Ralpa Boulevard*: In the giddy days of the return of disease, freedom, and postage stamps to Old Earth, a couple goes to consult an ancient fortune telling computer halfway up the outside of a 25 kilometer tower.

— Frank Dreier

Nightfall
by Isaac Asimov & Robert Silverg, 1990
based on the short story appearing in
Astounding Science Fiction, 1941

One of the classic story ideas in science fiction writing is "What if...?" What if a planet had multiple suns? Not all of them bright like our own, just near enough to provide light. With six suns, the planet Kalgash has continual daylight. It merely dims when the small suns dominate the sky. The darkness of night is a rumor, the ramblings of religious fanatics, a sideshow attraction for thrill seekers. At least until scientists find evidence that night will indeed come.

How will this affect a people who have never known darkness? There is evidence of night coming before. Catastrophic ruins. Modern day people on this planet are fascinated by the idea of darkness. Then some died when exposed to it. They are afraid of what lurks in the shadows.

As evening approaches, madness becomes rampant. Few people are prepared. Many are caught unaware as chaos closes in around them. Dawn will bring a new age of knowledge to a changed people. Provided they survive the night.

— Terri Muggy

Empire Star
by Samuel R. Delany
1966

Comet Jo comes from a small backwater planet. As another character points out, that's the only place you'll find people with a name like Comet Jo. Despite his simple beginnings, Jo is destined for great things. A series of complex events introduce Jo to a variety of characters as he becomes involved in an Empire-wide power struggle. Along the way, he learns how events shape the people involved and how those people shape the events. Traveling through space and time he encounters the best and the worst of the universe around him. He even finds himself coming and going. During his multiplex adventure, Jo discovers that knowing all the answers isn't quite as useful as knowing the questions.

— Terri Muggy

Dream Park
by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes
1981

I was absolutely captivated by this book when I first read it in 1982...I had just joined *Star Base Andromeda* and was only starting to get to know the members of the club and their personal interests. I knew several club members were interested in fantasy gaming (such as *Dungeons & Dragons*), but I knew nothing about those games. Someone recommended this book to me as an example of what D&D would be like if the technology existed to role-play in real life.

Dream Park manages to combine fantasy role-playing, hard sf, industrial espionage and corporate maneuvering — all in a believable and realistic environment. In the near future, Dream Park, an entertainment theme park (imagine Disneyland run by Bill Gates) has developed the ability to run full-scale live-action fantasy role-playing games, through a combination of live actors, holographic projections and a sort of virtual reality. "Gamers" are able to live out a 3 or 4 day adventure in an enclosed environment, in which they know they are playing roles, but it appears to be real. A group of adventurers is gathered for a mission, which ends up on a remote island, peopled by a tribal cargo cult, and the adventurers must locate and retrieve an object of value while battling zombies and culture clash. Behind the scenes, however, Dream Park is preparing to test a new chemical compound which will intensify the "reality" of the experience for the players. During the course of the game, someone leaves the "game world" and slips into the secured access passageways of the Park, stealing a sample of the new chemical

and inadvertently killing an employee. Things get dicey as the Park's head of security must then be inserted into the "game" to investigate which of the gamers is an industrial spy and now a killer in real life.

The characters in this novel are incredibly diverse and realistic, reminding me of many of the "gamer" types I've met in real life. Though hard-sf isn't normally my forté, the hard-sf elements in *Dream Park* aren't over-the-top, and are completely believable in their own right — although obviously many of the elements here are still years ahead of what's currently available. The story, on all its levels, was a thrilling read, and I can strongly recommend it to any SF fan, especially if you're already interested in fantasy gaming, or have been curious about the mind-set of gamers. *Dream Park* was followed by two sequels, also written by the Niven/Barnes team. *The Barsoom Project* (1989) was inferior to the first volume, although the repeat presence of several characters makes it an acceptable read. *The California Voodoo Game* (1992) is also a good read — perhaps not as interesting as the first book, but then it didn't have to break new ground either!

— Scott Clark

Time For the Stars
by Robert A. Heinlein
1956

Time for the Stars is the story of a series of starships, or "torchships," sent out from Earth in the 21st century to find new worlds to explore and colonize. These ships accelerate to a speed approaching the speed of light. To solve the communication problem at this speed, it is discovered that telepathy is possible between identical twins, and telepathy is nearly instantaneous at any distance. Twins are therefore assigned to the project to allow communication between the ships and Earth, with one twin on a ship, and the other twin either on another ship or on Earth. Drugs become necessary to slow down the thought processes of the twin on Earth and to speed up the thoughts of the twin on a starship, as the ships approach relativistic speeds. The book focuses on one set of twins, Tom and Pat Bartlett. Tom is assigned to the torchship *Lewis and Clark*, while Pat remains on Earth.

I read this book in high school, and for me it was a very moving and well-thought-out story of the excitement of exploring new worlds as well as the dangers and problems involved. Crew members are faced with the reality that loved ones on Earth will age much faster than those on board the ship, and it is very likely they will never see

Earth again. The danger of space travel is emphasized as members of the crew are killed during planetary exploration on their journey outward. All this, in a book published before the first satellite was launched into orbit.

— **Mike Ponte**

Tunnel in the Sky
by Robert A. Heinlein
1955

This is another Heinlein juvenile book I highly recommend, as gripping a story as ***Time for the Stars***. It was this book, read for an English class in high school, which prompted me to read all the rest of Heinlein's juveniles as well as the rest of his work from the beginning of his career through the 1960s.

This is the story of Rod Walker and a group of fellow high school students who are sent to another planet through a gateway-forming device as their final exam for a survival class. The test was only to last ten days, but a nova in the intervening space between Earth and the distant planet

cuts off the gateway and strands the class on the planet, with no idea what has happened or if the gateway will ever open again. The saga of these students as they are forced to rely on their wits and each other in order to survive, and to remain civilized in the face of dangers, both from this alien world and from themselves, made this a book I couldn't put down.

— **Mike Ponte**

The Crossroads of Time
by Andre Norton
1956

Just as ***Time for the Stars*** and ***Tunnel in the Sky*** made Robert A. Heinlein my favorite author, ***The Crossroads of Time*** made Andre Norton a close second-favorite author.

This is the story of Blake Walker, who becomes involved in a chase across parallel worlds for a criminal, being pursued by agents from a more advanced Earth than ours, one where atomic warfare took place centuries ago and the inhabitants have psi powers. The chase leads Blake through

numerous parallel New Yorks, such as one where Germany invaded England during World War II, causing civilization to collapse, or another where Eskimo-like people and mechanical monsters inhabit a place of abandoned towers. Some worlds are dead due to atomic or biological warfare, while others never developed life at all. This is the sort of reference material the writers of the TV show ***Sliders*** should be reading and adapting.

— **Mike Ponte**

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5100 Emerald Dr. #16
Lincoln, NE 68516